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Source: *The Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Nov., 1997), pp. 184-189

Published by: Phi Delta Kappa International

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20405989>

Accessed: 27/02/2010 21:15

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Thinking About Standards

BY NEL NODDINGS

The current emphasis on national standards is distracting us from larger social problems that must be addressed, Ms. Noddings cautions.

REASONABLE, well-intentioned people often disagree about the wisdom and usefulness of national standards as a strategy for education reform. None of us would argue in favor of low standards or no standards, but some of us fear that the concept of standards has not been analyzed carefully enough to warrant establishing national standards, that proponents of such standards have not fully considered the possibility of undesirable consequences, and that many closely associated issues, consideration of which might counsel a different role for government, have largely been ignored.

What Is a Standard?

Even staunch supporters of national standards admit that there is considerable confusion about the idea of a standard.¹ Some see a standard as a flag of sorts — something to rally around. Others see it as a goal to be reached, and still others see it as a description of various proficiency levels. In this last sense, a standard is a norm for quality control. Perhaps the clearest statement comes from Diane Ravitch, who describes three interrelated categories of standards: content (or curriculum) standards, performance standards, and opportunity-to-learn standards.

Content standards describe “what teachers are supposed to teach and students are expected to learn.”² Immediately, a matter that concerns many thoughtful educators arises. This innocent-sounding statement moves us too hastily past an important educational debate. Must students learn everything that teachers teach, or should the curriculum be rich in opportunities for the cooperative construction of learning objectives? Many of us who regard ourselves as good teachers provide much more than we expect students to learn, and we are often pleased and surprised when they learn things we hadn’t anticipated. Of course, there are some things that we think all students should know as a result of taking a particular course, but specifying exactly which things is a task requiring considerable thought, and the list we construct for *all* students will properly be much shorter than lists we create or eventually report for each student; we recognize that students have varying interests and capabilities. My main point here is that a simple statement that equates what teachers should teach with what students are expected to learn cuts short what should be a rich and com-

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plex educational debate.

"Performance standards define degrees of mastery or levels of attainment."³ We are familiar with performance standards from sports, from the commercial world of various instruments and appliances, and from licensing tests. Advocates of performance standards for schoolchildren neglect the fact that the performance standards for athletes and professionals are established for those who *choose* to take part in competitions or to enter certain fields. They require a voluntary commitment. K-12 education, by contrast, is compulsory. Students will use their educations for very different purposes; they are not voluntarily entering a particular field of endeavor. This is not to say that there are no skills that should be universally possessed at some level of proficiency, but it is not clear which ones should be specified, and whatever is specified for *all* is likely to be pathetically puny in contrast to what could be suggested if relevant differences in talents, plans, affiliations, and interests were taken into account. Any set of standards rich enough for a particular student will contain items unnecessary for many, and any set designed realistically for all will, paradoxically, be inadequate for anyone considered individually. I'll return to this problem in the next section, where I'll discuss some undesirable outcomes that may well emerge from the standards movement.

Opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards "define the availability of programs, staff, and other resources that schools, districts, and states provide so that students are able to meet challenging content and performance standards."⁴ How should these standards be determined? If all high school students in a given district are required to take algebra, for example, do they thereby have an "opportunity to learn" algebra? In particular, if students are not adequately prepared for algebra, if they see no reason to study it, if their teacher is not fully competent, if they are crowded into an unpleasant room, if they have to share outdated textbooks, can the *requirement* be regarded as an opportunity to learn? And if poor districts and states are to be held to the same OTL standards as wealthier ones (as poor students are to be held to the same performance standards as wealthier students), who will provide the necessary resources?

It is disheartening that so many adults are willing to prescribe standards that chil-

dren must meet and yet are so unwilling to dedicate themselves and their resources to meet standards for school delivery. Most advocates of national standards admit that OTL standards in some form are needed, but the political debate has almost faded away. (See, however, the recent New Jersey Supreme Court decision.) At present, fear of federal mandates and interference has all but eliminated meaningful OTL standards at the national level. Children are expected to meet high standards for learning, but it is not clear how poor children and their teachers will meet this expectation. Perhaps the new slogan will be "Just do it!"

Who Will Benefit? Who Will Be Harmed?

Well-intentioned advocates of national standards often argue that such standards will ensure students in poor districts of an education equal to that of wealthier students. All students will be expected to meet the standards. It is surely right to urge educators to believe in the innate capabilities of poor children. But when we know that the educational status of parents is the single strongest predictor of how children will do in school, it seems ludicrous to suppose that merely stating that "all children will perform task T at level P" will actually accomplish much. Clearly, some children have resources (both inside and outside schools) that make their success more likely.

Many of us fear that national standards may create the illusion that everyone now has a fair chance and that any resulting differences in outcomes — with regard to jobs or further education — are the fault of those who didn't try hard enough. Some people will be squeezed out in a system governed mainly by standards. Thus we have to ask who will benefit from national standards.

A couple of historical cases might prove helpful here. In the early part of this century, the Flexner Report resulted in sweeping changes in medical education. Many medical schools, unable to meet the new standards, had to close. Black schools and black people who needed physicians suffered under the new standards. It could be argued that, in the long run, the entire public benefited from higher standards for the training of physicians and that the temporary suffering of a few was more than offset by the eventual benefit to all. This

claim is debatable on several levels, but let us suppose that the changes were intended to benefit all patients and that they accomplished this — lives were saved, pain reduced, more vigorous health maintained. Most of us would say, then, that a good thing was done.

Now consider the dramatic changes effected in college and university departments of literature in the 1920s.⁵ In this case, changes were deliberately designed to raise the status of English departments. It was argued that instructors in English departments should look more like those in physics departments — that is, display roughly similar credentials. Sometimes it was explicitly stated that there were too many women in English departments and that their presence reduced the status of the discipline. Standards had to be raised. The result was a drastic reduction not only in female faculty members but in the number of women writers in the canon. Who benefited? Male scholars with the appropriate credentials clearly did so. It would not be easy to argue that students in general benefited from this move or that the general public received some demonstrable good.

Many more such examples could be given. Someone almost always bears a considerable cost when standards are raised or changed. I am not going to argue that the current standards movement is an effort to exclude some groups. But I think we must ask who will benefit and who will be harmed, whether the foreseeable harms are outweighed by the long-term benefits, and whether the immediate harms can be reduced. The benefits most often claimed are for the nation and its ability to compete in a world economy. But there is little persuasive evidence that workers in the U.S. are less capable or productive than other workers. Further, we can't argue, as we did in the 1960s and 1970s, that we need more mathematicians and physicists; we do not. If it is the nation that will benefit, we have to provide convincing evidence that the nation needs something that the schools could, but are now failing to, accomplish. We then have to show how this failing can be corrected by national standards.

Will the children benefit? It is often argued that all children need a "world-class" education to compete in today's economy. But if everyone were to meet new high standards, some would still have to do work that is ill paid today.⁶ Even a high-

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tech society needs to have food grown, transported, packaged, and sold. It needs maintenance people, servers, cleaners, bus drivers, animal groomers, retail salespersons, clerks, construction workers, plumbers, and a host of other workers. Will we pay more for the same job simply because the workers are better educated? I raise this question because I believe that the current emphasis on national standards is distracting us from larger social problems that must be addressed. Education by itself is not the solution to poverty. Thus it is not clear that national standards will serve all our children.

We might argue that we are aiming at benefits beyond the material. I would be delighted to hear such an argument — that education is rightly aimed at enhancing life in personal, social, recreational, spiritual, moral, and aesthetic domains. Is the standards movement aimed at producing better citizens, more loving and effective parents, persons with greater moral sensitivities, individuals with enhanced social graces and healthy psyches? Wonderful! But now we need an argument that explains just how national standards will promote these benefits. My guess is that all such aims will be deliberately culled from an approved list of national standards because many of our citizens fear the state's intervention in "private" life.

Some advocates of national standards agree with my view of educational aims, and they are as disheartened as I am by the flagging commitment of those in political power to do anything substantial to promote real benefits for children. But others respond that schools are designed only to provide academic instruction, that the kinds of goals I've suggested must be pursued outside of schools, and that national standards are properly aimed at the academic goals for which schools are constituted. Then, of course, we have come full circle. We are once again at a point where we must ask substantial educational questions. How can we begin to decide whether children will benefit if we rush to national standards without considering what aims are defensible for contemporary education?

One group that will clearly benefit from the movement is a subset of professional educators who will work on the project. Some will benefit from the sort of "middle-class welfare" associated with grants, lectures, conferences, consultations, and other activities. I include myself in this

group, even though I oppose the movement. Some general good can emerge from these projects, but self-interest will be evident everywhere. Mathematics educators will enthusiastically push math; art educators will push art; social studies educators will translate their own expertise into goals and standards for "all children" that few well-educated adults can meet. Because we know that professional self-interest is already at work, we have an obligation to slow the process, deepen our analysis, and urge a less parochial stance. What questions should we be asking, and how can we avoid the predictable competition among subject-matter experts?

Before leaving the question of harms and benefits, I want to examine a case that, on the surface at least, is less problematic than most others. My purpose is to show how complex the issues are. Suppose we decide to establish standards for a first course in algebra. Surely we cannot expect the same level of performance from all students. Even such a staunch advocate of national standards as Albert Shanker warned educators about this problem. Either our standards will be pitifully low, he said, or many children will fail. To avoid these unacceptable consequences, Shanker advised that we adopt more than one set of standards.⁷

We might, for example, adopt a scheme comparable to that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress; we could evaluate students as failing, basic, proficient, or advanced. Such a plan has the great merit of freeing educators to be honest about what students achieve. At present, we all know that many students are enrolled in "algebra" classes that hardly deserve the name. Students who complete these classes are often chagrined to learn that they must enroll in remedial classes at college. There are days, then, when I think it would be a good idea (at least a token of honesty) to enact such standards.

However, the issue is complicated. Lots of students will not be able to achieve even the basic level, and a reasonable question arises whether all children should be *forced* to take algebra. Here again, we have to retreat at least temporarily from a campaign for standards to a thoughtful discussion of what students really need and whether coercing them ("for their own good") is compatible with preparation for democratic life. In addition to the harm experienced by children who fail (at something they did not choose to do), what will be suf-

fered by those who score at the "basic" level? In an age of diminishing commitment to affirmative action, many youngsters who would formerly have qualified on paper (they "took" algebra) will now be weak candidates. How do we feel about this? I confess to being torn. On the one hand, I do not think we should deceive students by letting them suppose they have learned algebra when they have not. On the other hand, if they are *compelled* to take it, when some other form of mathematics might better serve their interests and talents, then I hate to see them penalized for our narrow choices and insistence that "everyone can do it."

I taught high school mathematics for 12 years. It is simply not true that "everyone can do it." Many hard-working, cooperative children have a very hard time with mathematics. I'd like to see a thorough discussion of these matters before committing ourselves to national standards, and I'd like to see respectable — even exciting — alternatives to algebra. If we respect and love our children, there is no reason why courses once regarded as not college preparatory cannot be challenging and useful. Forcing everyone to take algebra in the name of equality is, ultimately, disrespectful and self-defeating.

Neglected Issues

The underlying idea of standards seems to be that we need to be clear about what we are trying to accomplish in schools. There are other ideas that add to the enthusiasm — for example, the simple-minded notion that the U.S. should have a national curriculum because other nations, some of which post high test scores, have centrally controlled education systems. These copycat enthusiasts ignore the fact that the evidence linking central control and educational achievement is scanty. Some centrally controlled systems show up well on tests; others do not. But the belief that a statement of standards will improve education by making the tasks of schooling clear and cogent is, perhaps, the dominant one.

If this is so, thoughtful educators should be led to ask how well such ideas have served us in the past. In the 1970s, for example, the big fad was behavioral objectives, and many school districts invested huge amounts of professional time in re-writing their curricula in terms of these carefully stated objectives. We were sup-

posed to say exactly what students would do (content standards?), to what level of proficiency (performance standards?), and under what conditions (opportunity-to-learn standards?). The objectives movement, despite its vigor and the number of person-hours devoted to it, produced little demonstrable improvement. Indeed, some of us would argue that it reduced the quality of education by making it unnecessary for students to construct their own learning objectives, to learn how to make distinctions between important and less important material, and in general to take responsibility for organizing the material offered.

When objectives didn't "work," policy makers turned to "competencies." Many of us then asked the question I am asking now: How do competencies (or standards) differ from objectives? And if there is no significant difference, why should we waste valuable professional time formulating competencies or standards? Why not put our energies into tasks that are more promising?

During the decade of behavioral objectives, many teachers raised a question that we should take seriously now. They said, in effect: "Look, we've always known that kids are supposed to be able to add fractions with denominators up to 12 in fifth grade. That's not the question. The question is, How do we get them to do it?" Now *there's* a substantial task.

Why don't children learn what we think they should learn? Are our methods faulty? Are we teaching the wrong things? What *are* kids interested in? How can those interests be steered toward the material we deem important? Can schools impart knowledge without the cooperation of parents? These and many other questions point us toward the identification of deep problems that will not yield to the quick fix of stating goals, objectives, competencies, or standards.

Indeed, almost all schools have long had formal statements of goals; many also have detailed expositions of curriculum content. If the careful statement of goals hasn't worked at the local level, why should we suppose it will work at the national level? Of course, there are schools whose staffs seem to have given up and are serving their students badly. They must be reformed. But we don't need a set of national goals to tell us that something is badly wrong with these schools, and national goals will not solve these obvious

problems, because they simply skip over them.

Much more — volumes more — could be said about educational issues that need deep analysis and wide discussion, but I will close with a brief look at how we might approach the topic of standards in a democratic society.⁸

The Role of Standards In Democratic Education

We have long believed that democratic government requires at least the consent, if not the vigorous participation, of the governed. In consonance with this belief, John Dewey insisted on "the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process."⁹ If we are serious about raising standards, we have to help students understand what standards are and how they are related to the students' own purposes. Talking about standards with both teachers and students is not a waste of time. It is a prelude to establishing and meeting any meaningful standards.

To return to my earlier example, how might we discuss algebra standards with our pupils? I would explain frankly to them that there are certain things they must be able to do in order for me to certify to the school that they have learned algebra. I would be honest in confessing that this "basic" level would not be enough for them to tackle further academic mathematics without great difficulty. In reaching this level, they and I would satisfy a contractual requirement laid on us by various credentialing bodies. We would do an honest job at a level compatible with purposes understood by all of us. Then I would describe what has to be done (or what the best professional minds at this time believe must be done) to prepare adequately for further academic mathematics. Again, there would be considerable open conversation about possibilities, purposes, tradeoffs, and commitments. Finally, I would describe an enhanced course with no fixed limits. If you really love mathematics, I would say, there is no clear limit to what we might do together this year, but in the tentative syllabus I'll share with you, you can get a sense of the possibilities.

In this continuing conversation, it should be clear to students that all honest student choices are respected by the teacher. A stu-

dent planning a career in art or journalism, for example, might well want to work toward only basic proficiency in algebra. He or she will thereby satisfy a somewhat arbitrary school requirement. Such students should understand, because the teacher takes the time to advise them conscientiously, that if they change their minds later, they will need further preparation. The conversation is characterized at every point by a cooperative commitment to making well-informed choices. This approach avoids both the coercion so popular today and an irresponsible attitude of laissez-faire. All forms of coercion should be at least questionable in a democracy, and the coercion even of children should be thoroughly examined and justified. At the other extreme, abandoning children to their own ill-considered passions and whims is equally reprehensible. Teaching, at its best, requires familiarity with individual students and their needs. It requires conversation and the cooperative construction of standards.

The discussion of my approach to standards in first-year algebra might lead readers to suppose that I would endorse national standards "done right." I don't think so. The discussion and ensuing standard-setting is best done locally. Professional groups at the national level, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, can certainly provide invaluable guidance, but local educators have to decide what the sequence of study will be and why. Ideally, they should work closely with community colleges, local four-year institutions, trade schools, and businesses to establish standards that will enable students to make well-informed decisions. Genuine school/business partnerships, for example, would include such cooperative standard-setting, and businesses would provide work/study experiences for young people planning to enter the work world directly from high school. "Partnerships" in which businesses give money or computers and then sit on the sidelines complaining about the school's failures are not genuine partnerships. Setting standards is a sophisticated process both within disciplines and within wage-earning communities.

Throughout this process, in every subject, teachers should continue to ask: Why am I requiring this? Do students understand the mutual commitments we are making? Are the standards defensible? A conversation of this sort might be promoted at the national level, but the actual establish-

ment of standards at the national level might well defeat the whole purpose. If standards are to have meaning, the people who must meet them should be involved in their construction.

It has always been anathema to democratic life for authority to impose its dictates on unwilling subjects. To be sure, children are, by definition, not ready to make adult choices. But they can make some choices, and John Dewey argued that they must be helped to make *well-informed* choices at every stage of development if they are to become competent citizens in a democratic society. What responsibilities do adults — educators, policy makers, parents, citizens — have in aiding this process?

Mortimer Adler and others who advocate a uniform curriculum for all children have suggested that, unless they are coerced into taking certain subjects, some students will downgrade their own education.¹⁰ But if we take our own responsibilities as adults seriously, this should not be possible. Instead of assuming (with little or no evidence to back our contention) that physics is automatically superior to photography,¹¹ we should pledge ourselves to high standards in every course we offer. The educational questions I raised earlier and a host of others should be directed at *every course* that is offered in our schools.

It should not be possible for students to downgrade their education by choosing among the courses responsible educators offer. A school should be ashamed to offer “good” courses and “bad” courses.

It should also be clear that standards apply to adults and not just children. It is ridiculous and irresponsible to set standards for children that well-educated adults cannot meet. An editorial in *Rethinking Schools* quite rightly mocked Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson’s proposal for a fourth-grade standard that states, “Show a basic understanding of the role played by religion and civic values in the history of Wisconsin and the nation, and describe how that role is similar to, or different from, that role in an ancient civilization and a feudal society in Europe or China.”¹² The preposterous nature of this standard should underscore my point that standard setting is a complex process requiring sustained debate and sophisticated knowledge.

However, criticism of this one standard should not be taken as criticism of all standards that posit expectations for today’s children that their parents cannot meet. Many such expectations are justifiable, even essential. But exactly which ones? Again, we have to avoid not only nonsense but the quite understandable temptation for adult experts in a particular field to suggest (even fervently believe) that every-

one should master skills they possess but that are patently unnecessary for competent life in a democracy.

However, there are standards to which adults in a democratic society should be held. Some time ago, the Government Accounting Office estimated that schools in our nation require more than \$200 billion in repairs. Acknowledging this, the incumbent Presidential candidate pledged that the federal government would get the repair process started with some \$5 billion. That pledge was quietly ignored when a balanced budget was designed. My own youngest daughter teaches in a classroom with a roof that leaks during every rain. Pots are placed around the room to catch water. This has been going on for years. Perhaps a good start on national standards would require policy makers to establish and achieve defensible standards for their own contributions to the improvement of education. To establish standards for itself and to encourage widespread, thoughtful conversation for the entire citizenry is the best role for the federal government at this time — perhaps at any time.

1. Diane Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1995).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

5. See Paul Lauter, “Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study of the Twenties,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 9, 1983, pp. 435-64.

6. See Nel Noddings, “Does Everybody Count?,” *Journal of Mathematical Behavior*, vol. 13, 1994, pp. 89-104.

7. See the tribute to Albert Shanker in *Education Week*, 14 May 1997, p. 44.

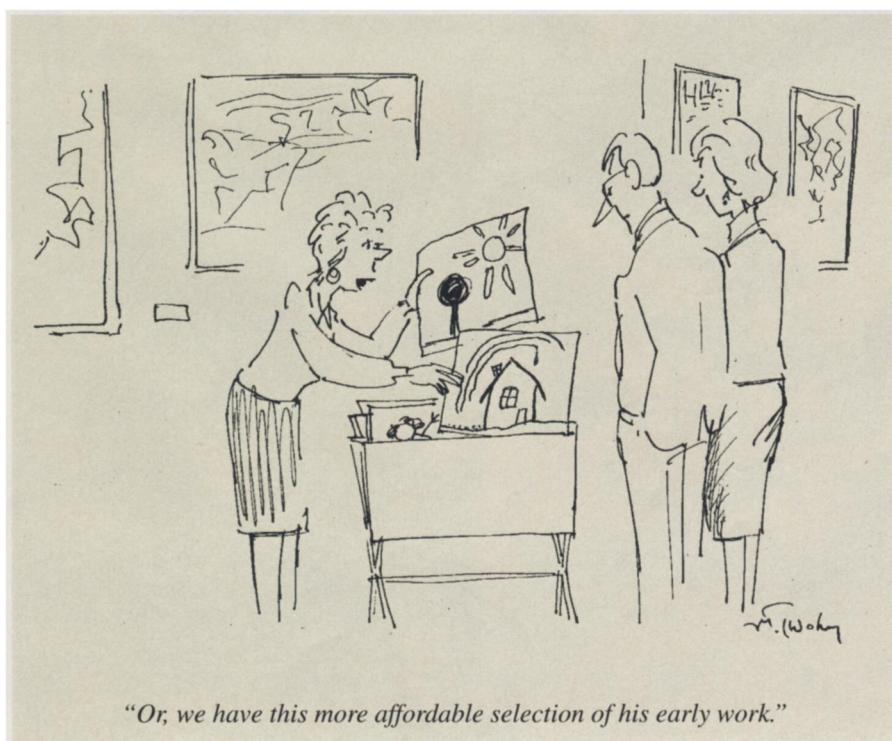
8. For further discussion of the debate over goals and standards, see Dayle M. Bethel, ed., *Compulsory Schooling and Human Learning: The Moral Failure of Public Education in America and Japan* (San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press, 1994); Blythe McVicker Clinchy, “Goals 2000: The Student as Object,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1995, pp. 383-92; Evans Clinchy, ed., *Charting a New Course* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996); and Ron Miller, ed., *Educational Freedom for a Democratic Society* (Brandon, Vt.: Resource Center for Redesigning Education, 1995).

9. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 67.

10. See Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

11. But see Mike Rose, *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995). Rose shows that courses in trade-like subjects can be powerful cognitively, instrumentally, aesthetically, and even morally.

12. “Hypocrisy Distorts the Standards Debate,” *Rethinking Schools*, Spring 1997, p. 2. **K**



“Or, we have this more affordable selection of his early work.”